
2023

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Recommended Citation

Straub, Kristina (2023) "Elizabeth Boyd's Disappearing Act: Performing Literary Legacy on the Georgian Stage," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.13: Iss.1, Article 2.

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.13.1.1316>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/2>

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Elizabeth Boyd's Disappearing Act: Performing Literary Legacy on the Georgian Stage

Abstract

How do we trace the historical processes that grant some writers visibility and, hence, legacy, while shoving others into the historical closet? This essay offers the case study of Elizabeth Boyd (1727-1745), a novelist, poet, and playwright who has received some attention from scholars interested in women's contributions to the legacy of William Shakespeare in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. In particular, her unperformed play, *Don Sancho: Or, the Students Whim, a Ballad Opera of Two Acts, with Minerva's Triumph, a Masque* (1739) dramatizes a woman writer's reflections on the politics of legacy at this formative moment in the history of authorship and the British theater. While the play was not performed, key scenes were later plagiarized in popular afterpieces by theater managers and playwrights Henry Giffard and David Garrick. Boyd, along with her inclusive vision of theatrical legacy as the domain of men and women of different classes, disappears in the male playwrights' fantasies of exclusively masculine, British literary greatness. The story of Boyd's erasure speaks to the gendered and classed exclusions and elisions in the social and economic processes by which legacy is formed, in this case, in the gendered power relations of eighteenth-century theater and its management.

Keywords

class, gender, theater, harlequinade, legacy, legibility, masque, spectacle, university, variety

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What is a legacy? What forms does it take? The legacy seems more or less impressive depending on the litmus test of canonicity, on how often writers are read and taught or, if we turn to theater, how often their plays are performed. Scholars of material culture might also think of buildings and monuments and ruefully compare the white marble gravitas of the Folger Shakespeare Library with the relatively humble House Museum of Jane Austen in Chawton or, worse, the hard-to-find grave of Frances Burney in a Bath churchyard. Legacy seems to correlate with the individual writer's degree of visibility, whether that means appearing on a course syllabus, staging a revival, or the size of a building. The legacy of an Austen shines with the glare of literary celebrity, while the legacy of a Burney glimmers more faintly in course syllabi and scholarly journals such as *Aphra Behn Online*.

Feminist and queer theory allows us to frame the concept of legacy within the politics of visibility. As Judith Butler has taught us, we see what is made "legible" by regimes of gender and sexuality that erase the very possibility of existence for some while enabling, indeed, even enhancing, the visibility of others (20). Similarly, the closet, as Eve Sedgwick claimed, is key to the structure of knowledge as we know it (2-4), and as feminist and queer scholars build the legacy of eighteenth-century women writers, we can simultaneously work to expose these epistemological "closets" as well as making visible individual writers. How do we trace the historical processes that grant some writers visibility and, hence, legacy, while shoving others into the historical closet?

Answering this question often involves going beyond exposing cases of straightforward discrimination against women (although there is no lack of these, either). Instead, I propose the idea that economic and cultural institutions—like the theater—often operate with the logic of legibility as theorized by Butler. I offer here the case study of Elizabeth Boyd (1727-1745), a novelist, poet, and playwright who has received attention from scholars interested in women's contributions to the legacy of William Shakespeare in the second quarter of the eighteenth century.¹ In particular, I will examine her unperformed afterpiece, *Don Sancho: Or, the Students Whim, a Ballad Opera of Two Acts, with Minerva's Triumph, a Masque* (1739) as a woman writer's reflections on the politics of visibility and, hence, legacy, at this formative moment in the history of authorship and the British theater. I situate this piece in relation to its afterlife in popular afterpieces by theater managers and playwrights Henry Giffard and David Garrick. The exclusion of Boyd's work from the stage and her disappearance from theatrical history speak to exclusions and elisions in the social and economic processes by which legacy is formed, in this case, in the gendered power relations

of eighteenth-century theater and its management. The way in which she has become visible to modern critical assessments of eighteenth-century theater is also telling. Boyd emerged into visibility in modern literary criticism under the wing of Shakespeare. Similarly, *Don Sancho*'s appearance on the eighteenth-century stage depended on the celebrity of Shakespeare, managed by men who controlled what was accepted for performance. The iconic image of a male poet supported by a theatrical management system run exclusively by men work together to put Boyd and her afterpiece behind the curtain of eighteenth-century theatrical legacy.

The work that I do in this essay, of deconstructing the process by which Boyd disappeared from theater history, does not replace the recovery project of women writers like her; indeed, it underscores its urgency. The teaching and criticism of Restoration and eighteenth-century theater contributed to the erasure of women from theatrical legacy, and is only beginning within the last three decades to reveal the ubiquity and power of women as both performers and writers. Felicity Nussbaum, Helen Brooks, Elaine McGirr, Laura Engel, and myself have, among others, made the creative work of actresses an important part of our historical and critical thinking about theater.² Aphra Behn, Mary Pix, Susannah Centlivre, Hannah Cowley, Frances Sheridan, and Elizabeth Inchbald are among the most performed playwrights of eighteenth-century theater, and just now are beginning to get attention from both scholars and theater practitioners.³ Modern scholarship, influenced by feminist, performance, and affect studies, is beginning to recognize the power of these popular, female-authored plays, which were written to be performed, not read with silent reverence in the classroom. That said, anthologies and syllabi over the course of the past century have given the larger share of page space to a few Restoration comedies and their heirs in word-dense comedies by Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. As a result, generations of students have been left unaware of the plenitude of woman-authored plays that were true blockbusters in their day and persistent parts of the theatrical repertoire. Similarly, theater education has largely ignored the variety of entertainments—including afterpieces—that were important and popular parts of the eighteenth-century stage and often played more frequently and to larger and certainly more diverse audiences than the five-act main piece. As a result, even theater-makers well-educated in the plays of this period are unlikely to bring a women-authored afterpiece to the modern stage.⁴

Modern scholars and theater makers, however, are not altogether to blame for the disappearance of women's theatrical legacy. Masculine control over the creative and financial management of the eighteenth-century stage has a lot to do with the need to recover the power and presence of women in the theater during this

period. Hence, in addition to recovery, modern scholarship on eighteenth-century theater also needs to expose the gendered conditions of theatrical management that pushed women playwrights into invisibility, robbing them of their theatrical legacy, and robbing us of a canon of highly entertaining, performable plays. This work entails paying attention to the choices that theater managers made to stage or not to stage a writer's work. I would not claim that managers rejected more work by women than by men—indeed the large number of hit plays by women on the London stage during the long eighteenth century belies such a claim. However, managers controlled what plays were performed in the London theaters and management was exclusively the domain of men. Even though women gained prestige and financial power as actresses, the door to management was firmly closed. A powerful, celebrity actress such as Susanna Cibber, who had strong dramaturgical chops, might well influence the decision-making of a David Garrick in his management of Drury Lane Theatre, but her attempts to formalize her position in management came to naught. Excluded from management, women writers wielded even less control than most playwrights and certainly less than men like Colley Cibber and Garrick who managed their own theaters. The rejection of Boyd's afterpiece in itself is not, therefore, surprising. What is surprising is how two men who managed theaters plagiarized key elements of Boyd's play in their own frequently staged afterpieces.

The scene that Giffard and Garrick pulled from *Don Sancho* was likely chosen for plagiarism because of its spectacular celebration of Shakespeare. Boyd was part of a group of women who were instrumental in bringing an unprecedented number of Shakespeare's then-underperformed plays, especially the history plays, to London theaters in the 1730s. The "Shakespeare's Ladies Club" not only contributed to the uptick of Shakespearean performances on the London stage, an event which was an important precursor to David Garrick's 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee and his highly effective promotion of Shakespeare as the Bard of England, but they also instigated the erection of the Sheemaker Shakespeare monument in Westminster Abbey in 1740.⁵ The climactic scene in *Don Sancho* is the elevation of two monumental statues depicting John Dryden and William Shakespeare, embodying the triumph of English vernacular literature over the archaic education allegedly purveyed by Oxford and Cambridge. Giffard's *Harlequin Student* and Garrick's *Harlequin's Invasion* both re-enact that scene, minus Dryden. Plagiarism is no stranger to British theater, of course, and this instance does not evince any particular prejudice towards Boyd or women playwrights in general. But it does indicate how theater managers commodified the increasingly saleable image of Shakespeare while suppressing the power of feminine creativity that is clearly represented, as we shall see, in Boyd's afterpiece.

Women playwrights could be and were highly successful, but they did not take on the public visibility of a Garrick or even a Giffard. An interesting exception is Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821), who acted for twelve years as well as writing multiple hit plays, and did attain financial security through the canny investment of her earnings. Inchbald's plays had strong runs during and after her lifetime, but are only recently being noticed and appreciated by scholars and theater makers. I suspect that her disappearance from the canon has a lot to do with the very reason that they are now being revived: Inchbald was a theater practitioner and her plays and afterpieces were written to shine on the stage rather than the page. The theoretical interventions of performance and affect theory, in partnership with the feminist recovery project, promise to give visibility to a wealth of plays and afterpieces by women and we have much to look forward to as scholars and theater audiences. Boyd, however, is a harder case for recovery since her only play was never performed. The work I take on in the rest of this essay veers, then, from recovery to a better understanding of what was suppressed in Boyd's play even as her work was coopted into highly successful theater. *Don Sancho* celebrates English vernacular literature in the monumental bodies of Dryden and Shakespeare, but it also dramatizes the power of a woman artists creating for a mixed-class, mixed gender audience.

Don Sancho never made it on the stage in the first place (though it seems to have come close). I surmise that Boyd's afterpiece may have been deemed unplayable by manager John Rich (though prompter William Chetwood apparently encouraged it) because it would have staged a very different vision of what makes for theatrical legacy than the masculine literary lineage of Shakespeare as predecessor to Garrick, his worthy heir, on the eighteenth-century stage. The text of the afterpiece allows us to pan out from Giffard's and Garrick's focus on the literary celebrity of Shakespeare to Boyd's broader vision of legacy, a vision that is inclusive of women and non-elite men. Boyd's afterpiece incorporates classical with vernacular learning into a performance that seeks to entertain the most diverse possible theater audience while critiquing elite male control of literary value. Boyd exemplifies an inclusive, one might almost say democratic, spirit in eighteenth-century theater culture that is not always recognized by modern critics.⁶ The impulse towards inclusive popular entertainment as an alternative to elitist hierarchies of art and knowledge is not exclusive to Boyd, but the fate of her play is a particularly clear case of how the commercial entertainment business, as it emerges in the eighteenth century, put financial and managerial power in male hands in ways that erased women's participation from the stage and its historical record. That said, the published, print version of Boyd's play is archival evidence of the opportunities that commercial entertainment seemed to offer women such as Boyd in the eighteenth century. The growing business of

popular print and performance opened up space for literary and theatrical production that was not confined to elite, educated men—up to a certain point.

It is no accident that Boyd chose to set her play at the University of Oxford, with the main characters of three students whose occult performances produce, not Latin or Greek classical knowledge, but the English vernacular literary icons of Dryden and Shakespeare. Boyd's play reflects a contemporary crisis in the universities' status in the context of a growing commercial culture invested in the selling of, among other things, the value of vernacular literary and theatrical production. As the universities lost their reputation as bastions of learning between the Restoration and nineteenth century,⁷ public venues for literary and scientific knowledge in print and performance flourished. Boyd puts Oxford students on the stage at a moment when the university's credibility was threatened by stories of internal corruption, and satires of Oxford culture and traditions, in particular, appeared in plays such as James Miller's *The Humours of Oxford* (1730), as well as satires in poetry and prose by writers as diverse as Alicia D'Anvers and Nicholas Amhurst.⁸ Simultaneously, a growing commercial print and performance market for forms of literary production was appealing to an increasingly diverse literate public.

As part of a larger critique of the brand of literary learning institutionalized in the universities, Boyd's play parodies university education as outdated, occult knowledge: the university scholars conjure visions of Shakespeare and Dryden with magic spells learned from a heavy tome stolen from "Don Sancho," an impoverished nobleman living on the charity of the university community.⁹ This magic produces monuments of Shakespeare and Dryden as symbols of vernacular literary knowledge and taste, superior to the students' obscure learning.¹⁰ The monument of Shakespeare rebukes Sancho's outdated, occult "science" and an English legacy of vernacular, accessible literature supplants the obscure and questionable erudition of Don Sancho and the university scholars, a shift that is orchestrated by the female goddess, Minerva, in the masque, and Boyd herself, as she appears in the print apparatus surrounding the play script itself. If Shakespeare represents a vernacular, English legacy in print and on the stage, women are going to be a part of that legacy, as we shall see below. Boyd's vision for performance brought to the stage three different classes of students—a nobleman, gentleman commoner and servitor (a "charity" student who serves his more well-to-do fellows)—as well as a classical god and goddess, cupids, and "Lilliputians," who do homage to the busts of notable modern and classical authors. The performance she imagined is characterized by vernacular literary and theatrical legacies performed as the spectacular variety that theater makers were increasingly pressed to provide their diverse audiences.

The word “variety” occurs frequently in justifications for the number and diversity of performances that joined the five-act play on the stages of London theaters. As Richard Leveridge, the musician/composer and sometime theatrical entrepreneur writes, “As Diversion is the Business of the Stage, ’tis Variety best contributes to that Diversion”(np). Commercial theater was particularly marked as a site of “variety.” Instead of multiplying examples, I will cite the “Introduction” to *The London Stage, 1660-1800* that observes, “To a constant reader of early eighteenth-century theatrical advertisements, probably the most striking characteristic of these thirty years [1700-1730] is the growing emphasis upon variety” (Part 2: Vol. 1, xviii). “Variety” is also the title of a long poem, “Humbly offer’d to the GOD of CHANGE” published by Boyd in 1727. While variety is not always positive and can be deployed as critique, especially when applied to the music, dance, special effects, and spectacle of performances such as the popular Harlequinades that theater managers were often pressured to produce, it also correlates with a more inclusive commercial market for literature and theater, both in terms of literary and theatrical content, the audiences for it—and the creators of print and performance, such as Boyd.

The theme of a public sphere in which “variety” makes space for multiple diverse performances, including those of a woman writer, emerges from the printed text of *Don Sancho* in 1739. The dedication to Lord North, then a gentleman of the bedchamber to Prince Frederick and an intermediary in the tense relations between the prince and his father, aims for reconciling the elite, academic learning with “low” commercial entertainment through the intermediary of Shakespeare who will “solve the Scruples of our bright Collegians, whose humourous Curiosity will, its Authoress flatters herself, possibly give Birth to Entertainments more polite”(np). The word “scruples” is worth noticing for its connection to religious belief (and religious faction), as well as its more specialized meaning of academic quibble. Boyd casts Shakespeare in an ambitious role, as a sort of peacemaker, like North, between opposing factions in a vision of the public sphere in which the classical, academic learning confined to men and the “variety” of popular “Entertainments” are united to produce a “more polite,” yet still popular theater.

A prologue, addressed to Alexander Pope, not coincidentally a Catholic, and therefore, like Boyd, excluded from the universities, recapitulates some of the more positive aspects of “variety” from her earlier, 1727 poem:

Tho’ Chaos-born, the Mimick was design’d
As Fortune hum’rous, and as Fancy kind;

Where mingling sportive Ideas claim a Place,
And every jarring Atom apes a Grace. (np)

Besides aligning herself with Pope's acknowledged poetic achievement (and also, perhaps, his anti-Walpole, Scriblerian politics), the dedication evokes his work as translator of Homer and editor of Shakespeare. Like North in politics, Pope is a sort of mediator, a figure with a foot in both camps of the war between ancient and modern literature and a promoter of accessibility, making both Homer and Shakespeare available to those who are not classically educated or need editorial assistance. Boyd positions herself as part of a larger project of diversifying literature, theater, and of broadening the audiences for both.

The printed text documents the failure of her effort and her accompanying frustration at the theater's refusal to stage *Don Sancho*. Boyd reminds us throughout the apparatus surrounding the script—the dedication to North, two prologues and an epilogue—of her authorship and her attempts at getting her afterpiece produced. Boyd gives us multiple and contradictory reasons for its rejection, and scholars remain uncertain about the “real” reason. The refusal of a play or afterpiece was common, however, and often not any indication of its quality or, for that matter, the gender of its author; the famous example of Colley Cibber, manager of Drury Lane Theatre, turning down John Gay's fabulously successful *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) is the most prominent instance of a managerial failure to recognize a good thing. Boyd's first prologue explains *Don Sancho*'s publication and its failure to be performed as her physical inability to sustain the rigors of production endured by playwrights of the period, who were often expected to supervise rehearsals: “BY Illness barr'd, a Theatre's Applause, /We to the Closet fly to aid our Cause” (np). A second prologue, in some copies bound at the end of the play while in others at the beginning, returns to the afterpiece's rejection for performance and its subsequent publication by putting the subject into the mouths of two players. The first Player explains, “the Season's late, and Hell knows what” (np)—and leaves the stage in a huff at the idea that the piece, if performed, would have been damned: “I'd say it were Prejudice, meer party Spleen (*Exit in a Heat*)” (np). The second Player, more philosophically, alludes to the first plays barred from performance after the Theatre Licensing Act in 1737: “Say shall meer ballad Farce, assume a Force, /To shake the Dome; and make the Actor Hoarse” when, as a footnote explains, the tragedies of *Edward and Eleanor* and *Gustavus Vasa* are prohibited from the stage (np). By shifting the focus from questions about her afterpiece's quality to the hard work and political battles fought by authors, Boyd not only puts her work into public circulation, but also documents the institutional processes that excluded it—as well as others—from performance.

In the midst of discussing the exclusion of *Don Sancho*, the business of theater interrupts the players' duologue as the first Player re-enters "Hastily" to remind his colleague of a rehearsal for John Weaver's popular dance performance, *The Loves of Mars and Venus*:

1st Player Gods! Are you mad, they'l practice strait the Masque,
What properties are ready-----to your Task;
2nd Player 'S Death, I'd forgot, hold, what is it to be,
Oh Mars and Venus; gad I'll in and see. (Exit) (np)

The choice of John Weaver's *Loves of Mars and Venus* is interesting; though highly popular in the years following its opening in 1717, Weaver's dance spectacle had not seen a performance since 1724. While it's possible that Boyd was behind the theatrical times, it seems more likely that she chose this rather outdated spectacle as an example of what would pass censorship under the Licensing Act of 1737 and as a foil for her mixed-genre spectacle of embodied performance and spoken drama, of spectacle and the celebration of Shakespeare and Dryden.

The First Player remains to speak the prologue's closing lines, which evoke Boyd's authorial presence along with Shakespeare's ghost and the "Ladies" in the theater responsible for his presence:

*I've clean mislaid, young Cupids Bow and Dart,
Ladies your Aid, or we shant win a Heart;
Be just, be kind, theres Mercy in those Eyes,
Minervas Triumph, be the Fair Ones Prize;
Whose Magick Charms, controul the learned Sage,
(Forget the Errors of the Female Page,)
And once again, bid Shakespear bless the Stage;
Soul-Soothing Shade, rouz'd by a Woman's Pen,
To Check the impious Rage of lawless Men:
Whose curious, clamours, bold Enquiries ceas'd,
The happy Genii's see, are swift releas'd. (np)*

"*The Female Page*" refers to Boyd's novel by that name, first published in 1732 and reissued in 1737; her "*Woman's Pen*" combines with the "*Ladies*" in the audience in supplanting Weaver's performance with "*Minervas Triumph*," a theatrical spectacle combining song, dance, special effects and language, that celebrates the English vernacular literary tradition in the form of "*Shakespear*."

While, as Scheil and Ritchie both suggest, this prologue seems to allude to the Shakespeare Ladies Club and their efforts to revive his plays and raise his monument in Westminster Abbey, it also celebrates mixed entertainment forms that combine popular pleasure with erudite knowledge. Even more significantly, a “*Woman’s Pen*” pulls off an act that puts elite, masculine knowledge in the service of vernacular literature and spectacular performance. The “*Magick Charms*” of “*Minervas Triumph*” will “*control the learned Sage*” as the female-sponsored “*Soul-Soothing Shade*” of Shakespeare calms the “*Rage*” of “*lawless Men*.” Variety need not lead to dissension and social disorder if women are in charge of it.

Indeed, Boyd’s *Minerva’s Masque*, if performed, might have matched Weaver’s spectacular entertainment, with hovering “*little Boys like Angels*” who introduce “*Minerva’s Temple, the Altar-piece richly adorn’d with the Statues of the most celebrated ancient and modern Poets, several Priests and Priestesses attending the Altar, who are employ’d in burning Incense to each different Statue, still playing a profound Obeisance as they pass them.*” Minerva and Apollo enter in a “*Triumphal Car*” to a chorus, as “*Lilliputian Gods and Goddesses . . . present beautiful Flowers at the Altar, which all strew in their Turn at the Statues Feet, when all join in the following Dialogue, soft Musick playing the while*” (II, 15). Boyd’s authorship presides then, over “variety,” in which Shakespeare joins dancing, singing, and stage spectacle rather than supplanting it. The “*Woman’s Pen*” evokes Shakespeare as part of popular, theatrical “variety,” not an alternative to it.

The conjuring scene that leads to *Minerva’s Masque* also incorporates Shakespeare into a vision of theatrical variety. The ghosts of Shakespeare and Dryden, summoned by Don Sancho before the masque, are not, initially, amused by the students’ desires to see them; they chastise Don Sancho for charming “the Happy from their bless’d Abode/To satiate a fond never sated Itch past humane Depth”; the Oxonians’ curious “Itch” is, significantly, coupled in the Ghosts’ “*sung*” speeches with theatrical “Toys and Trifles”: “To behold a pageant Rise,/For the Wretch who starving dies:/What provokes a Seraph’s Spleen,/But to view so sad a Scene” (II, 12). Sancho, however, defends conjuring these ghosts of an English literary tradition as a creative act that may “fire new Worlds”: “Example only influences Merit, /To covet Honour’s a heroic Frailty, /And it’s a Nation’s Glory to reward” (II, 13). Unimpressed, the ghosts clear the stage for Minerva and friends. At the end of the masque, however, they re-emerge in the monumental forms that anticipate the soon-to-be-erected Westminster Abbey monument to Shakespeare.

The ghosts, then, are replaced by monuments which are easy to imagine in the style that Michael Dobson points out in Sheemaker's 1740 monument in Westminster Abbey—that of an eighteenth-century gentleman (157-8). Instead of grouchy, archaic spirits, Shakespeare and Dryden are modernized as contemporary monuments to British taste; to insure a wide appeal, their inscriptions in Greek and Latin are translated aloud for the audience by the commoner Taste and the noble Lovewit, while the servitor, Joe Curious, takes notes. In a sort of popularized remake of the Oxford Act, a tourist attraction for Londoners in the late seventeenth century as well as a university tradition, the students perform classical learning in the service of celebrating an English dramatic tradition through music, dance, and theatrical special effects. The learning of the gown and the theatrical pleasures of the town combine in a spectacle that celebrates language and the body, learning and sensual pleasure.

The Oxonians whose “curiosity” evokes this spectacle perform, in turn, the “*lawless Men*” who are brought into line by Boyd's mixed genre performance. Lord Lovewit, a nobleman, Jack Taste, his gentleman commoner friend, and Joe Curious, a former “Boy” on “the Charity List,” first watch Sancho's conjuring of the ghosts of Shakespeare and Dryden and then watch the masque that follows. They begin the afterpiece with song and comic dialogue in a scenario that readers would find familiar from satirical depictions of Oxford: students on the lam from their tutors, creating mischief after curfew. Joe Curious, the servitor, has never heard of Shakespeare and Dryden and must be educated by his noble and gentle companions: “Your Pardon, Sirs, your Pardon; we poor Boys on the Charity-List you know are but meer Ignoramusses” (I, 4). When the masque begins, Joe thinks he is seeing “a Company of Country-Strollers” until Taste educates him: “Minerva's Temple Thickskull, can't read, the Poets in Effygy, yonder are the Priests humble Servants, d'ye see” (II,13). Boyd's vision of academic and theatrical performance makes a point of class difference among the university's male elite. However, unlike the by then almost stock figure of the servitor as mere servant who probably never takes his degree but is at Oxford mainly to make a living, Joe is an educable member of a community joined in reverence for English literary tradition. Boyd's concept of variety extends to her vision of the audience who benefits from and appreciates Shakespeare; Joe's surname labels him with the same enquiring impulse as his fellow students.

The performance of knowledge belongs to women as well as men. A female goddess controls the masque that includes goddesses as well as gods, girls as well as boys, among the “Lilliputians.” Feminine presence is not confined to mythological figures, however. The play's epilogue, printed in the front matter of

the book, focuses on Joe's relation to an off-stage, but palpably present Boyd. Carrying on his fear of "spirits" from the play, Joe quotes Boyd defiantly:

The Authoress too, the very worst of Spirits,
Cries Sawce, don't hum and ha, but praise my Merits;
But she may do't herself for honest *Joe*,
Lying's so base, I'll drop the Job and go. (np)
Joe and Boyd have a highly corporeal encounter, however, that keeps Joe on the stage, warming up the audience for the play and puffing the author:
Odsugs she's here! gad I must bid you clap,
Or I shall get a most confounded Rap,
(*here Joe runs to the Door and screams out.*)
Oh Mercy! oh my Ears you heard the Slap!
Make a Noise somewhere, good Somebody clap. (np)

Sound from offstage—a scream and a slap—comically evokes the presence of the woman writer, disciplining the male body into supporting her right to public hearing and support. The diverse body public that Boyd imagines requires enforcement from one of its primary stakeholders: the educated woman writer. She is important to a "variety" that entertains a diverse audience of mixed status and gender. Boyd's inclusion of Joe Curious, the boy on the "Charity List," significantly opens the field for performing knowledge, though he requires, ironically, like Shakespeare, the controlling hand that holds the "Female Pen."

Don Sancho was never performed, for reasons that remain unclear; Boyd clearly intended it to be, and, according to her preface, it had the prompter William Chetwood's serious consideration. But Boyd's piece did have an afterlife in plagiarized versions by Henry Giffard and David Garrick, first performed, respectively, in 1741 and 1759. In Boyd's published—and prophetic—prologue, one actor proposes, "were I the Authoress, I'd Print, It may be Play'd." The other responds, "Print an unacted Opera, for what, /To damn the Copy, and expose the Plot:/Oblige some Pyrate, with a Virgin prize,/Poets, tho' rarely Rich, are sometimes Wise" (np). And, indeed, it seems more than likely that Boyd's print *Don Sancho* fell to Giffard and later Garrick as the "Virgin prize" she had predicted it would become.

Giffard's *Harlequin Student* channels misguided university erudition into Harlequin, who begins the afterpiece dressed as a student. The monument to Shakespeare enters to dramatize the replacement of bad male learning with good as embodied in Shakespeare's legacy. The woman writer is nowhere in sight and

the role of the goddess Minerva is subordinated to the stage-management of Cupid and Mercury. The erasure of female authority and power is significant, I would argue. While Giffard's afterpiece implicitly acknowledges the demand for popular entertainment forms that appeal across class lines, it suppresses Boyd's vision of female authorship as part of British vernacular literature. Despite her dedication to Pope, Boyd did not share the poet's notorious lack of respect for women authors as it was blazoned in the 1729 *Dunciad*. Her 1727 poem *Variety*, a broad catalogue of "variety" in forms as various as popular entertainment and the natural world, praises contemporary writers of worth, including numerous women: Eliza Haywood, Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, and Susanna Centlivre (62-66). While Boyd shared Pope's need to cultivate a popular audience, she did not see women authors as competitors. As the feminist recovery project has now made clear, women authors were prominent makers and shapers of popular, vernacular literature in the first half of the eighteenth century. Boyd sees herself as part of women's power on the scene of popular literature and entertainment. Pope attacked that power; Giffard erases it.

It's impossible to know if David Garrick read *Don Sancho* or if he was riffing on Giffard's afterpiece when he wrote *Harlequin's Invasion* (1759), his answer to popular demand for pantomime, particularly during the Christmas season. Garrick knew his audience, and his afterpiece, which included the innovation of a speaking Harlequin, was incredibly popular, performed 167 times in 11 seasons at Drury Lane Theatre.¹¹ Garrick's *Harlequin's Invasion* restores the monument of Shakespeare, who sweeps the stage of everything "other" to the British, embodied in a "blackamoor" Harlequin who suspiciously mixes French and English, to instate a masculine British poetic legacy in the form of Shakespeare's monument. ("*Shakespear rises: Harlequin sinks*"[III, ii, 224].) As with Giffard's pantomime, women are decoupled from the creative energy and learning associated with Shakespeare; Garrick's female characters play stock comic roles of overbearing wife and foolish ingénue, and Minerva does not appear in the final spectacle of Shakespeare's monument, which is orchestrated by Mercury.

John O'Brien reads this play as pandering to British Francophobia in the decade leading up to the Seven Years War (135). Jonathan Crimmins disagrees, correctly citing Garrick's propensity to reconciliation with the French, at least in the world of art and theater (563-565). I'm inclined to read Garrick, as Crimmins does, as writing inclusive entertainment for as broad an audience as possible, but the play's concluding spectacle begins with a transparency that represents "the powers of Pantomime going to attack Mount Parnassus" and "a storm" that "destroys the fleet." As O'Brien notes, this scene theatrically re-enacts the Battle of Quiberon Bay, in which a French naval invasion was scuttled by stormy

weather, reinforcing his reading of the play as anti-French (134). British national identity is performed at the end of Garrick's piece as "*many of Shakespeare's characters enter*" to perform and dance at the final chorus:

Ye Britons may fancy ne'er lead you astray,
Nor e'er through your senses your reason betray.
By your love to the Bard may your wisdom be known,
Nor injure his fame to the loss of your own. (III. ii, 225)

In this spectacle of national and racial othering, gender difference sinks along with Harlequin. British literary legacy emerges as exclusively male. To draw on Sedgwick, one could say that Giffard and Garrick, by rendering the woman writer—indeed, female creativity—invisible, build an epistemological closet in which only knowledge produced by men is visible and valid.

Boyd, as a writer, is worthy of recovery. *Don Sancho*, like a lot of understudied, eighteenth-century plays, lends itself hilariously well to reader's theater in the classroom. Like so many popular eighteenth-century plays, many written by women, it is meant to be voiced and embodied, and students can have fun with the comic exchanges of their student counterparts of nearly 300 years ago. In addition, I argue that her writing gains power if we understand it in the context of the process by which her writing and her identity were shoved into the closet. This task is admittedly a tall order in the classroom where one is often teaching students whose grasp of context is inhibited by deficits in historical knowledge. I would argue, however, that putting these three short, teachable texts together—Boyd's, Giffard's and Garrick's—would give students some sense of the process by which Boyd's work remained unperformed while Giffard's and Garrick's made their authors money—and ensure the legacy of Shakespeare, if not Henry Giffard or David Garrick. A big bonus that comes with this pedagogical approach to legacy is that students are given a taste of theater history that is often obscured or even ignored in eighteenth-century studies, let alone the classroom.

Boyd is literally invisible on the British stage even as her afterpiece provided the raw material of Shakespeare's legacy, the epitome of British, masculine literary excellence, in the hands of Giffard and Garrick. I am not suggesting a conspiracy theory. Rather, I hope to suggest that the workings of the commercial market for entertaining knowledge as it played out in Giffard's and Garrick's hands helped to shove female creativity into a gendered closet. While the commercial market for literary knowledge presented opportunities for women writers and performers, it also followed the rules of a kind of cultural primogeniture that privileges masculine legacy. Feminist scholars can do a lot to correct this misgendering of

legacy by exposing the work of a masculinist and capitalist entertainment industry.

The version of feminist recovery work I model here raises questions even as it explains why writers like Elizabeth Boyd were ultimately invisible to literary and theater history. For example, Jacqueline Pearson notes that after “1737 the number of plays written by women slumps. In the fourteen years until 1750, only nine known plays were written by women, and of these four were performed but not published, and three published but not performed”(252). How did the British Parliament’s passing of the Theatre Licensing Act in 1737 impact the ability of women writers to participate in the theater industry around the middle of the eighteenth century? And how do we account for the resurgence of women writing plays after 1760 when work by Frances Sheridan, Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald was performed and published to great applause and acclaim? The legacies of writers for the stage—always a commercial enterprise in the eighteenth century—are embedded the workings of markets and the institutions with which they interact. A better understanding of these workings can help us trace how cultural legacies are formed around individual writers by processes that go far beyond the power of a single author’s oeuvre to shape our notions of valuable literary—or theatrical—property.

This essay is part of a special issue: “Shaping the Legacy of 18th-Century Women,” guest edited by Marilyn Francus, *Aphra Behn Online* 13, no. 1 (Summer 2023). To read the essays in the cluster, follow this link: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/>.

¹ Notably, Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1779* and Fiona Ritchie, *Women and Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*.

² See Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*; Brooks, *Actresses, Gender and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women.*; Engel and McGirr, Eds., *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater, 1660-1830*; Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology*. This is not a comprehensive list.

³ Feminist scholarship in the last three decades has brought eighteenth-century women playwrights to the attention of modern theater-makers, placing them, ironically, in the vanguard of professional and university theaters revisiting an eighteenth-century repertoire that has long been lost or performed solely as monuments to white, male, upper-class privilege. Frances Burney’s *A Busy Day* and *The Witlings* were performed on British and American stages a handful of times in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. For example, Red Bull Theater Company in New York City produced an online performance of Burney’s *The Woman Hater* on January 25, 2021 and of Hannah Cowley’s *Belle’s Stratagem* on January 22, 2021. More recently, Red Bull has presented online readings of Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure* and Elizabeth Inchbald’s afterpiece, *Animal Magnetism* (<https://www.redbulltheater.com/live>).

⁴ In a happy contradiction, Inchbald's *Animal Magnetism* has been brought to the stage in 2022-2023 by Creation Theatre, Oxford, UK, and Red Bull Theater of New York, as theater makers are beginning to realize the entertainment appeal of the three-act play for modern audiences.

⁵ See Schiel, 106-127, and Ritchie, *Women and Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*.

⁶ A recent exception is Bridget Orr's *British Enlightenment Theatre: Dramatizing Difference*. Orr draws our attention to popular stage performances that stressed the toleration of differences and a more inclusive vision of British society than is usually recognized.

⁷ Many standard histories of the English universities tell this story of decline during the long eighteenth century. See, for example, Charles Edward Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford. Volume II: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. 463.

⁸ James Miller's *The Humours of Oxford* had 7 performances in the 1730 season. Alicia D'Anvers was the daughter of the University of Oxford's first architypographus and the author of the Hudibrastic poetic satire, *Academia, or the Humours of Oxford* (1691); Nicholas Amhurst published *The Terrae-filius*, a bi-weekly newspaper satirizing life in Oxford, in 1721.

⁹ The Spanish title of "Don" may reference Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, but it is just as likely to have resonated with eighteenth-century readers as a reference to Susannah Centlivre's highly popular and often performed play, *The Wonder, or A Woman keeps a Secret* (1714), set in Spain, and whose hero, Don Felix, became a favorite comic role for David Garrick. Spanish masculinity is subject to British, xenophobic stage humor as early as Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677). The Spanish Don on the stage is, like Cervantes' hero, both a figure of fun, but also respectful compassion.

¹⁰ These two writers also often appear as champions of contemporary English literature in the early eighteenth century's obsession with the battle between the "Ancients" and the "Moderns", that is, classical Greek and Roman literature versus modern English literature. See, for example, *A Tale of a Tub, to which is added The Battle of the Books, and The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit, Together with The History of Martin, Wotton's Observations upon The Tale of a Tub, Curll's Complete Key, etc.* Eds. Adolph Guthkech and David Nichol Smith.

¹¹ See Commentary and Notes on *Harlequin's Invasion, The Plays of David Garrick*. Ed. Harry William Pedicord and Fredrick Louis Bergmann. Volume I. *Garrick's Own Plays, 1740-1766*, 405. Subsequent citations to this text will be noted parenthetically.

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